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ABSTRACT

The findings of nine studies comparing the symbolic play of middle-class and lower-class children are summarized and examined in detail. Related research problems are discussed and directions for future research are indicated. Examination of the studies indicated that few general conclusions can be drawn from them about the relative quality of symbolic play among lower-class and middle-class children. However, there is agreement among studies that the content of play themes and roles is the same among middle-class and lower-class children, and that the amount of verbalization is greater among middle-class than lower-class children. More investigators report that group play is more prevalent among middle-class than lower-class children; more report that "persig" play (often called role-differentiation and similar to what Piaget called collective symbolism) is more prevalent among middle-class than lower-class children; and more report that middle-class children are more likely to use semi- and non-representative as well as imaginary signifiers than lower-class children, while lower-class children are more likely to use representative signifiers than middle-class children. Concerning the relative cognitive maturity of the play of the two populations, no general conclusions can be drawn. Other factors which may have affected the studies' results are suggested and the need for a more holistic, integrative, and qualitative approach is indicated. (Author/RH)

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The Symbolic Play of Lower-Class and Middle-Class Children: Mixed Messages from the Literature

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Which of the following statements is true?

1. The symbolic play (dramatic play) of middle-class preschool children differs in almost every way from that of lower-class children of the same age.
2. There are very few systematic differences in the symbolic play of middle class and lower-class children of preschool age.

If a poll were taken of teachers, psychologists, and other observers of young children, it is likely that a high proportion would subscribe to the first statement. Moreover, if questioned further, they would also interpret the difference to mean that symbolic play not only occurs more frequently among middle-class children, but also that it is of a higher quality than that of lower-class children.

This belief in the superiority of the play of middle-class children, triggered by observations in Head Start centers where large numbers of children from "poverty-level" families attended preschool educational programs for the first time, was reinforced by the publication in 1968 of Smilansky's book, The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children. In this book two studies were described - a preliminary comparative study and a study of the effects of training on the symbolic play of lower-class children. In the preliminary study, Smilansky

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compared the symbolic play of two groups of children attending preschool classes in Israel. One group (which she characterized as "disadvantaged") consisted of lower-class children of immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries; the other (called "privileged") consisted of middle-class children of European descent. She described the play of these two groups as being at opposite poles with respect to the incidence, elaboration, and complexity of symbolic play. The impact of her findings is due not only to the fact that her study was the first of its kind, but also to the inferences she drew from the findings that the play of the privileged children was more advanced cognitively than that of the disadvantaged children, and that the latter needed specific training to learn to play symbolically.

That the Head Start children did not seem to engage in symbolic play as much as and/or in the same ways as did the middle-class children who attended independent nursery schools and who had, until then, been the usual subjects of investigations of symbolic play, was a source of concern to those who believed that young children learn primarily through play and that symbolic play is important for children's cognitive and affective development.

This, in addition to a more general concern about the difficulties experienced in school by children from economically impoverished homes (which was one of the reasons for the establishment of the Head Start program), led to a rash of studies aimed at documenting the specific differences in cognitive functioning between lower- and middle-class children as well as the sources of these differences (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1964). On the basis of their findings, many of the investigators prescribed, and often translated into reality, intervention programs de-

signed to overcome the "cognitive deficits" which they found in disadvantaged preschool children (Feldmann, 1964). Smilansky's work stimulated the introduction of programs aimed at teaching lower-class children to play symbolically and encouraged studies of the effects of training on young children's play.

Despite the renewed interest of researchers in play in general, and in symbolic play in particular, there have been very few comparative studies of the symbolic play of lower-and middle-class children. Of those studies that have been done, some support Smilansky's findings, others contradict them.[1] Moreover, if looked at in close detail, the picture that emerges from these studies is more confusing than enlightening, and offers more questions than answers about both findings and methodology. The sources of these differences in results are important to consider in relation to further research in the field. In this paper I shall summarize briefly the nine most relevant comparative studies in an effort to clarify their disparate findings, discuss some of the problems involved in this kind of research, and finally, outline possible next steps.

Brief Description of Nine Comparative Studies

Smilansky (1968) compared the symbolic play of middle-class and lower-class 3- to 6-year-old children. For evaluation of the children's play, she chose six elements which she considered essential to symbolic play. Four of these apply to symbolic play in general (that is, when the child is playing alone or with others) and two to sociodramatic play (in which two or more children interact). Because her findings are almost entirely descriptive and she does not report on these six elements systematically, it is difficult to disentangle them from additional, more qualitative aspects of symbolic play which she also discusses. One can, however, find scattered (though often unclear) references to all of them.

In this comparative study, Smilansky found differences between the two groups on all dimensions studied except for the content of play themes and of the roles the children enact. She states that while all six elements were observed in the symbolic play of middle-class children at age 3, most of the elements were lacking in the play of lower-class children from ages 3 to 6. From this she concluded that the differences between the two groups are not due to differences in rate of development but that they involve a difference in basic style.

Questioning Smilansky's findings that the children of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants do not develop the ability to engage in symbolic play, Eifermann (1971) studied the symbolic play of 6- to 14-year-old lower- and middle-class Israeli children in two elementary schools.[2] She found that more lower-class 6-and 7-year-olds (of the same cultural background as Smilansky's sample) engaged in symbolic play than middle-class 6-and 7-year olds. Eifermann suggests that lower-class children reach the peak of symbolic play at a later age than do middle-class children; that is, there is a developmental lag in the symbolic play of lower-class children. She considers that her findings refute Smilansky's conclusion.

Two American psychologists also based their studies on Smilansky's work. Griffing (1980) used Smilansky's six play components[3] and found statistically significant differences (in the same direction as Smilansky) between 5- and 6-year-old black middle-class and lower-class children with regard to all six components. In contrast to Smilansky, Griffing defined her categories clearly, and used a more refined system for coding play (4-point rating scales) and statistical methods for determining differences between the two groups. In general, her study was more carefully executed and, unlike several of the other studies, she did not confound ethnicity and social class.

Rosen (1974) compared the play of black lower-class and white middle-class kindergarten children as a prelude to an intervention study with a sample of lower-class children. She found that the white middle-class kindergarten children engaged in more sociodramatic play and often at a more sophisticated level than the black lower-class children (p. 926). However, she does not define sophistication.

Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung (1976) compared the symbolic play of middle-class and lower-class 3- and 4-year-old Canadian children with respect to Parten's (1932) social play hierarchy and Smilansky's translation of Piaget's three play stages into the following four categories: functional play, constructive play, dramatic play, and games with rules. Rubin et al. found a marginally significant difference between the two groups with respect to "cooperative" symbolic play. The lower-class children engaged in less cooperative symbolic play than the middle-class children.

Smith and Dodsworth (1978) compared the "fantasy" (symbolic) play of 3-and 4-year-old children from middle- and working-class backgrounds in England. The study was designed to examine quantitatively Eifermann's developmental lag hypothesis at the preschool age range. They used three criteria (which the investigators have shown to be developmental indices which determine whether a developmental lag exists): (1) "elaborated" use of objects relative to "replica" use; (2) the number of participants in play; and (3) the length of play episodes. They also investigated the amount of group play and the level of verbalization and compared their findings with Smilansky's. Since statistically significant differences were found between middle-class and lower-class children with respect to two of their criteria and verbalization, they concluded that "the data give some support to Eifermann's developmental lag hypothesis" (p. 189).

Golomb (1975) compared the symbolic as well as other kinds of play[4] of 3-to 6-year-old middle- and upper-middle-class American children with that of lower-class children of the same age. She constructed a complex symbolic play scale, combining a number of play behaviors, some of which are coded as separate categores by other investigators. She also coded several of the play-scale components individually. In addition, several of her categories, which in other studies apply to symbolic play alone, include other play activities. She found no systematic differences between the two groups on any of the symbolic play variables investigated, nor in the developmental changes which occurred in each social-class group.

In studying the play of English children, Tizard, Philps, and Plewis (1976b) investigated the influences of social class and educational orientation of the preschool centers attended. In addition to symbolic play, their social-class comparisons included a wide range of other kinds of play activities (sand play, rough and tumble play, construction). Their definition of symbolic play, unlike those used in most other studies, subsumed other types of symbolic representation, such as drawing. (See Tizard et al., 1976a, pp. 252-253, for their categorization of play.) Although this alone would not preclude comparison with other studies, only one of the categories they used for coding play--"dramatic impersonations"--is comparable to those used by other investigators. Here, they found no difference in frequency between the 3- and 4-year-old lower-class and middle-class children.

As part of a study aimed at investigating the developmental changes that take place in young children's symbolic play, Stern, Bragdon, and Gordon (1976) compared the play of middle-class and lower-class 3- and 4-year-old children to determine areas of similarity and difference. Their

study differs from those mentioned above in that it examines the play behavior of children who do play, and not, as did the others, the play of all children in the selected classes. Stern et al. found very few differences between the middle-class and lower-class groups when compared on 23 symbolic play behaviors.[5]

Detailed Presentation of Findings of the Nine Comparative Studies (see Table 1)

Because the vocabulary of symbolic play varies from study to study, I shall use the terms defined by Stern et al. (1976) in presenting the findings of the comparative studies. Equivalent terms used by other investigators for what appear to be the same or similar play behaviors are given. But first some of the most basic terms must be clarified.

When a child acts as if she/he were another person (a doctor using a stethescope on a doll), an animal (moving around on all fours and barking like a dog), or even an inanimate object such as an airplane (running swiftly with arms out-stretched and making motor sounds), it is clear to most people that she/he is engaged in role-play--often used as a synonym for symbolic play. This kind of play was called "persig" play by Stern et al. ("persig" standing for person as signifier). When a child (who is not a "persig") makes an object act as if it were a person, animal, or object (moving a small square block along a curvy block road, saying "beep beep," as if the small square were a car) this is also symbolic play.[6] Stern et al. called this "obsig" play ("obsig" standing for object as signifier) to distinguish it from persig play, and because there is no commonly used term for it. Smilansky's term, "imitative role play," (and Griffing's "role play") are equivalent to persig play, and apply both to individual and group play, and their sociodramatic play is equivalent to group persig play. Even when the use of objects as signifiers is included

in their analyses, none of the other investigators except Tizard et al. (1976a) and Golomb (1975) appears to differentiate between obsig and persig play as Stern et al. (1976) do. (but cf. Piaget's definition, 1962; also, Curry and Arnaud, 1974; Halfar, 1970; Huston-Stein, Friedrich-Coffer, & Susman, 1977).

Insert Table 1 about here

Only the findings on the eleven symbolic play behaviors which are included in two or more studies will be presented here. In order to compare the findings of these studies, it is often necessary to treat as equivalent categories which are not. The categories used in these studies vary in degree of inclusiveness as well as in consistency of inclusiveness. They may cover group and individual play, group play alone, individual play alone, other play activities as well as symbolic play and, in one case, non-play activities; they may also be composite (combining two or more different play behaviors) or simple (only one).

Group play is included in all but one study (Table 1). The Stern et al. group play category differs from Smilansky's, Giffing's, Rosen's, and Rubin's et al. in that it includes obsig play, while the others apply only to persig play.[7] Golomb's category is more inclusive than the rest because it covers play activities other than symbolic play. Smilansky, Griffing, Rosen, and Rubin et al. found that the incidence of group symbolic play was greater among the middle-class than the lower-class children. Smith and Dodsworth's group play category includes both associative and cooperative play (Parten's categories, 1971). In estimating the amount of group play, they also included other play activities as well as symbolic play.

Table 1

Comparison of Symbolic Play of Lower-Class and Middle-Class Children: Results of Nine Studies

Categories	Stern, Bragdon & Gordon (1976)[1]	Golomb (1975)	Tizard, Philps & Plewis (1976)[1]	Smith & Dodsworth (1978)	Smilansky (1968)	Griffing (1980)[1]	Rosen (1974)[1]	Rubin, Maioni & Hornung (1976)[1]	Eifermann (1971)[1]
Group Play	m.c.=l.c.[2]	(Cooperative Pretense Play)[3] m.c.=l.c.		m.c. = l.c.	(Interaction) m.c. > l.c	(Interaction) m.c.> l.c	(Socio-dramatic play) m.c.>l.c	(Cooperative dramatic play) m.c.>l.c	(Symbolic play) l.c.> m.c
Persig Play	m.c.=l.c.	(Role Play) m.c.=l.c.	(Dramatic impersonations) m.c.=l.c.		(Imitative role play) m.c.>l.c.	(Role Play) m.c.>l.c.	(Role Play) m.c.>l.c		
Type of Signifier	(Representative) ---------- (Semi-represent.) ---------- (Non-represent.) ---------- (Imaginary) m.c.=l.c.	(Objects as replicas) (Undefined objects) (Imaginary) m.c.=l.c.		(Replica use) l.c.>m.c. ---------- (Elaborated use of objects= semi repres. & imaginary) m.c.>l.c	(Toys) l.c.>m.c. ---------- Undefined objects ---------- (Make believe re objects) m.c.>l.c.	("Make believe with objects" = all types of signifiers) m.c.>l.c.			
Emotional Stance	m.c.=l.c.	(Affective involvement) m.c.=l.c.			(No specific term) m.c. only				
Persig Differentiation	Age 3: m.c.=l.c. Age 4: m.c.=l.c.	(Appropriate role division) m.c.=l.c.			(No specific term) m.c. only				
Length of Play Unit	m.c.=l.c.	(Episode duration) m.c.=l.c.		m.c.=l.c.	(Persistence-(10' +) m.c.>l.c.	(Persistence most of 5" period) m.c.>l.c.			

Table 1 (cont.)

Categories	Stern, Bragdon & Gordon (1976)[1]	Golomb (1975)	Tizard, Philps & Plewis (1976)[1]	Smith & Dodsworth (1978)	Smilansky (1968)	Griffing (1980)[1]	Rosen (1974)[1]	Rubin, Maioni & Hornung (1976)[1]	Eifermann (1971)[1]
Themes and Roles		(Play themes and roles)[2] m.c.=l.c.			(Themes and roles) mc.=l.c.				
Amount of Verbalization	m.c.=l.c.			(Verbalization) m.c.> l.c.	(Amount of speech) m.c.=2xl.c.	(Verbal communication) m.c.> l.c.			
Persig Language	Age 3: m.c.=l.c. Age 4: l.c. m.c.				(No specific term) m.c. only	(Verbal expression)			
Labeling of Play	m.c.=l.c.					of make-believe) m.c.> l.c.			
Socialized Communication	m.c.=l.c.	(Socialized language) m.c.=l.c.							

[1] Statistical tests were used to determine the presence of significant differences between the lower-class and middle-class groups. All differences are statistically significant.

[2] m.c. = middle-class group; l.c. = lower-class group.

[3] Parentheses around a category name indicates that this is the term that the invesitgator(s) used.

Although they found more group play in the middle-class group than in the lower-class, the difference was not significant. Neither Golomb nor Stern et al. found any difference between the groups, whereas Eifermann found that at ages 6 and 7 (combined) more lower-class than middle-class children engaged in group symbolic play.

Of the six investigators who compared the lower-class and middle-class children with regard to the incidence of persig play, three (Smilansky, Griffing, and Rosen) found that it occurred more frequently in middle-class than in lower-class groups; three (Stern et al., Golomb, and Tizard et al.) found no difference between the groups. The Stern et al. category applies only to group play, while, in the other studies, it applies to individual play as well. The Golomb category is part of her symbolic play scale.

When children play, they use objects, real or imaginary (called "signifiers") to represent people, other objects, animals, story or TV characters ("the signified"). The degree to which the signifier and the signified resemble each other may vary. For example, a child may use a stick, a pillow, or a very human like doll to represent a baby. Five studies took account of the type of signifier children use. Stern et al. defined four types of signifiers in terms of the distance between the signifier and the signified with respect to perceptual, functional, and class relationships. Representative signifiers closely resemble the signified (a toy car with many details of a real one); semi-representative signifiers bear some resemblance to the signified (a closet represents a jail); non-representative signifiers have little or no resemblance or functional relationship to the signified (a block represents a baby); and an imaginary

signifier is an imagined object or person of which we become aware because of the child's actions or words.

Stern et al. found no difference between the two groups in the use of the four types of signifiers. They found, moreover, that approximately half the signifiers used by both groups at ages 3 and 4 were representative. The child's use of representative, non-representative, and imaginary signifiers serves as one cue for his/her score on Golomb's symbolic play scale. Golomb found no differences between the two groups on this scale. Smilansky's category, "make-believe in regard to objects," refers to the use of actions and verbalization as substitutes for toys, equivalent to imaginary signifiers. She found that middle-class children tend to use imaginary signifiers and also "undefined objects" (non-representative signifiers), while lower-class children tend to use toys (representative signifiers). Smith and Dodsworth found that middle-class children showed more "elaborated use of objects" (i.e., semi-representative and imaginary objects than lower-class children, while lower-class children were more likely to make "replica use of objects" (i.e., representative objects). Griffing found that middle-class children engage in "make believe with objects" more than lower-class children; i.e. they use more signifiers--representative, non-representative, and imaginary combined.

Emotional stance has to do with the way children express emotional qualities--through their actions, language, or facial expressions. In symbolic play, "mother" may be bossy or loving or punitive, may be concerned with the "baby's" need for food and tenderness, or may ignore it. Stern et al. found no difference between the groups in the incidence of this kind of behavior at ages 3 and 4. Golomb's "affective involvement" is

defined similarly to emotional stance.[8] She also found no difference between her groups in this respect. Smilansky describes the middle-class children in similar terms, but states that lower-class children do not behave this way. The middle-class child, she says, "really plays the part, imitates tone and gestures, spoils and is spoiled, shouts in mock anger, speaks pompously" (p. 37) while, among the lower-class children, "there is no evidence of dramatic text, verbal identification of the child with this role, or other signs, gestures, and so on, of dramatic involvement" (p. 39).

Persig differentiation[9] refers to the fact that when children play "train" together, one may be the conductor, another the engineer, and others passengers. Smilansky's description of how the middle-class child "reacts dramatically to the dramatic image projected by his fellow player, from within his own role" (p. 37) probably refers to similar behavior. Smilansky found that this occurred only in the play of middle-class children. Golomb found no difference in "appropriate role-division" between her two groups, whereas Stern et al. found that, although at age 3 the groups are similar, at age 4 there is a marginally significant difference in the incidence of persig differentiation--more among the middle-class than the lower-class children.

Five studies include a measure of attention span, but the mode of measurement varies somewhat from study to study. Smilansky and Griffing measured children's play attention span in terms of specified time limits. Smilansky defines "persistence" as "the child persists in a play episode for at least 10 minutes," and, therefore, apparently ignores all play lasting a shorter time. Griffing rated the length of the play on the basis of 5-minute play segments. Smith and Dodsworth estimated "length of episode"

(within each 5-minute time sample). Stern et al. and Golomb, on the other hand, measured the duration of the play episode, whatever its length. Stern et al. defined length of play unit as the number of minutes during which a child stays with a specific play content even though she/he may interrupt it one or more times in response to external or internal stimuli. Golomb also divided the play of each child into episodes (for symbolic play her criterion is change in character of the play resulting, for example, from change in participants) and measured "episode duration." Stern et al. found that, at both age levels, the two groups were similar with respect to length of group play units, in those lasting 20 minutes or less as well as 21 minutes or longer. Smith and Dodsworth report no significant difference between middle-class and lower-class children in the mean length of play episodes. Golomb also found no difference in the length of play episodes. Both Smilansky and Griffing found that middle-class children's sociodramatic play lasted longer than lower-class children's. Only two studies compared the two groups with respect to the content of play themes and roles. Both Smilansky and Golomb found no differences.

Five studies were concerned with the use of language in symbolic play--the extent to which it is used, the functions it serves, and the use of socialized language. Comparing the two social-class groups with respect to amount of verbalization (average number of symbolic play-related statements per child), Stern et. al. found no difference between the two groups. Griffing, however, found that verbal communication was greater in the middle-class than in the lower-class group. Smith and Dodsworth scored verbalization "for each one-minute period in which the child was seen to make a meaningful statement" (p. 187). They found that middle-class children were more likely to verbalize than lower-class children.

They included statements made during both symbolic and non-symbolic play. Smilansky found that the average number of words per child in the middle-class group was twice that of the lower-class group. However, her category is not really equivalent to the categories of other investigators because she not only included language spoken during drawing, painting, and building as well as during symbolic play, but also language that is not play-related. Smilansky states, however, that the differences between the groups would probably be greater if only play-related language was included.

Stern et al. define persig language as language spoken by a child when she/he is a signifier (e.g., "All aboard," when a child is a conductor on a train); that is, it is an integral part of the play symbolism. They found no difference between the groups at age 3, but at age 4 the lower-class children surpassed and the middle-class children. In contrast, Smilansky found that only middle-class children used persig language. Griffing's "verbal expression of make-believe" combines persig language and verbal descriptions accompanying symbolic actions. She found a highly significant difference between the groups on this variable, the middle-class children greatly exceeding the lower-class children in their verbal expression. The Stern et al. category, labeling of play, is similar to Griffing's "verbal expression" category (without persig language), but there was no difference between the groups in frequency of use.

Stern et al. and Golomb found no difference between the two groups in the use of socialized communication (the child talks with the intention of communicating with another person). Golomb's category applies to other play activities as well as to symbolic play.

Summary of Findings

This review of study findings indicates that there is an almost complete split between Smilansky/Griffing/Rosen/Rubin et al. and Golomb/Tizard et al./ Stern et al. Within each of the two groups, the number of studies in which the results are the same for any play category depends almost entirely on the number of studies in which the category was included. Smith and Dodsworth can not be included in either group, because with respect to two categories they are in agreement with each group.

Within the Smilansky group, all four studies found that the middle-class children engage in more group play than the lower-class children. Smilansky, Griffing, and Rosen found that middle-class children engage in persig play more than do lower-class children; Smilansky and Griffing found that symbolic play lasts longer, and that there is more verbal communication in the middle-class group than in the lower-class group. Smith and Dodsworth also found more verbal communication in the middle-class group than in the lower-class group. Smilansky found that the middle-class children use non-representative and imaginary signifiers more than the lower-class children, and lower-class children use representative signifiers more than middle-class children, while Griffing found that middle-class children use more of all types of signifiers than do lower-class children. Smith and Dodsworth also reported that middle-class children use semi-representative and imaginary signifiers more than lower-class children, and lower-class children use representative signifiers more than middle-class children. Of the remaining five categories, four (emotional stance, persig differentiation, persig language, and content of themes and

roles) were included as distinct categories only in the Smilansky study, and one (labeling of play in combination with persig language) only in the Griffing study. The only exception to the pattern of higher incidence of each play behavior in the middle-class group than in the lower-class group was in relation to content of themes and roles, which Smilansky found to be the same in both groups.

Golomb, Tizard et al., and Stern et al., on the other hand, found no difference between the middle-class and lower-class children in the amount of persig play. Golomb and Stern et al. also found no differences in the amount of group play, in the use of representative, non-representative, and imaginary signifiers, and in emotional stance, length of play unit, and socialized communicaton. Smith and Dodsworth also found no significant difference between the middle-class and lower-class children with regard to group play and length of play unit. Golomb found no difference in the amount of persig differentiation, but Stern et al. found no difference only at age 3. The remaining three categories were included only in the Stern et al. study. No difference was found in persig language at age 3, but the lower-class children used persig language more than the middle-class children at age 4; there was no difference in labeling of play or amount of verbalization.

Similarities between the middle-class and lower-class children are minor. Both Smilansky and Golomb, who were the only ones to investigate the content of themes and roles, found no differences between the two groups. Like Smilansky who, however, did not differentiate in terms of age, Stern et al. found that at age 4 there was more persig differentiation in the middle-class than in the lower-class children's play.

Discussion

These contradictory findings bring into clear focus the amount of dissaray in this area of research. Findings to date not only make it virtually impossible to answer the questions which prompted this review, but also raise new ones which are equally unanswerable.

The first question raised concerned the ways in which the symbolic play of middle-class children was similar to or different from that of lower-class children. It is evident now that very few general conclusions can be drawn about the relative quality of symbolic play among lower-class and middle-class children. Excluding the findings of Stern et al. and Eifermann[10], for those play categories reported in two or more studies we find the following:

1. There is agreement that the content of themes and roles is the same among middle-class and lower-class children, and that the amount of verbalization (however defined) is greater among middle-class than lower-class children.
2. More investigators (five as compared to one) report that group play is more prevalent among middle-class than lower-class children; more (three to two) that persig play is more prevalent among middle-class than lower-class children; and more (two to one) that middle-class children are more likely to use semi- and non-representative as well as imaginary signifiers than are lower-class children, and that lower-class children are more likely to use representative signifiers than are middle-class children.

The consistency of these results, despite the many differences in methodology and in the characteristics and backgrounds of the samples, is an indication of their validity. These findings, however, provide little

enlightment about the nature and, especially, the quality of the symbolic play of middle-class as compared with lower-class children. Although there is, as yet, no substantiating evidence, the findings of the Stern et al. study suggest that the symbolic play of lower-class and middle-class 3- and 4-year olds is similar in many respects. The findings of Eifermann and of Smith and Dodsworth suggest that there may be a developmental lag in the symbolic play of lower-class children.

The second question was: What inferences, if any, can be made about the relative cognitive maturity of the play of middle-class and lower-class children? In order to make inferences about the relative cognitive maturity of the play of middle-class and lower-class children, there must be evidence of a positive relationship between age and/or intelligence (or some other clearly cognitive characteristic) and the incidence of specific play behaviors.

In five of the nine studies, the relationship between age and specific symbolic play behaviors was investigated. The combined findings of Stern et al., Golomb, and Rubin et al. indicate positive relationships between age and many symbolic play behaviors. All three found a positive relationship between age and incidence of group play, and both Golomb and Stern et al. found relationships with a number of others (e.g., length of play unit, emotional stance, persig differentiation, the use of imaginary signifiers). Smith and Dodsworth, on the other hand, report that age was not an important factor in influencing the number of samples in which symbolic play was observed.

Smilansky[11] found no relationship between age and scores in her six basic symbolic play categories, including group play, but she does mention some age-related changes in the play of the middle-class children <u>other</u>

than the six components: "The play becomes more complex, more fulfilled, more completed, more sustained, more flexible within expanding limits, and so on" (p. 40). In addition, both Smilansky[12] and Griffing[13] report no relationship between intelligence and symbolic play. It is interesting to note, however, that Smilansky does make assumptions about the relative cognitive maturity of the six basic play behaviors. In all cases, a higher incidence of these play behaviors is assumed to be more advanced. She concludes, therefore, that the play of the middle-class children is more advanced than that of the lower-class children.

Thus, there is some evidence from these studies that age influences specific play behaviors,[14] but there is only negative evidence with regard to the relationship between intelligence and symbolic play behaviors. On the basis of age alone, we might conclude that middle-class children are more cognitively advanced than lower-class children with respect to amount of verbalization, incidence of group play, and use of imaginary signifiers in symbolic play. No general conclusions, however, can be drawn from these studies regarding cognitive differences between middle-class and lower-class children.

All these studies started out with the assumption that socioeconomic status could influence the quantity and/or quality of children's symbolic play. Since, in most studies, the differences in socioeconomic background between the comparison groups were very large,[15] the presence of so many contradictory findings implies that socioeconomic status, by itself, is not the overriding influence in the symbolic play of young children. Apparently Smilansky found this to be true. In her experimental study of the effect of teaching on disadvantaged children's play, she combined into one control group both lower-class and middle-class Israeli children of

European extraction because "we did not find significant differences in their sociodramatic play" (p. 109). This not only supports the findings of Golomb and Stern et al., but also suggests that cultural factors might be responsible for the dramatic differences Smilansky found in her comparative study.

Smilansky, who stresses cultural differences, describes the home situations of the lower-class Israeli children of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants and those of the middle-class children of European extraction as very different with respect to the nature of the parent-child relationship (particularly the authority relationship); the presence of toys, didactic games, and books in the home; encouragement of and participation in their children's symbolic play; responsiveness to children's needs and attitudes toward play vs. non-play activities. The paucity of information about cultural and family backgrounds in the other studies precludes any comparisons.

It is unlikely, however, that the cultural differences between the lower-class and middle-class populations in the United States, England, and Canada, where the other studies were located, are as vast as those Smilansky describes in her "disadvantaged" and "priviledged" populations. (see Table 2) Smilansky herself suggests that the culturally deprived children of "Asian-African" extraction in Israel are different from the culturally deprived children of European extraction because of the differences in home experiences as well as in the "different stimuli that the environment (outside the family) affords the culturally deprived child(ren) of European extraction (television, for example)" (p. 62). Yet many American psychologists as well as educators have assumed that her findings apply to American middle-class and lower-class children. At the

same time, the contradictory results of the studies reviewed here suggest that the degree to which the comparison groups differ with regard to cultural background is not a primary influencing factor.

We are still faced, therefore, with two related, unanswered questions: If social-class and/or cultural differences cannot be considered responsible for similarities and/or differences in symbolic play, on the basis of these studies, what can? And, what factors are responsible for the contradictory findings?

Information from the studies about the characteristics of the sample, type of school and play situation, data collection procedures, analytic methods, as well as background factors, were tabulated in order to find out if there were any systematic differences between middle-class and lower-class children which might provide clues. Only those which are reported on by all eight investigators[16] were examined (see Table 2). They are: (1) country in which the study was located; (2) age range of the sample population; (3) socioeconomic status of the families; (4) racial and/or ethnic background; (5) type of educational institution attended by the children; (6) number of schools/centers attended by the children; (7) site of observations; (8) type of data; (9) focus of observation; and (10) analytic measures. Inspection of these data indicated that although there are no systematic differences between the two groups there are many differences within each group, slightly more within the Smilansky study, however, than in the other studies.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2
Background Factors in Eight Studies

Categories	Stern, Bragdon & Gordon (1976)	Golomb (1975)	Tizard, Philps & Plewis (1976)	Smith & Dodsworth (1978)	Smilansky (1968)	Griffing (1980)	Rosen (1974)	Rubin, Maioni & Hornung (1976)
Location of Study	United States	United States	England	England	Israel	United States	United States	Canada
Age of Sample	3s & 4s	3 to 6	3s & 4s	3s & 4s	3 to 6	5s & 6s	"Kindergarteners"	Mean age-3.88
Socio-economic Status of Comparison Groups	m.c.[1]-upper-m.c. l.c.-"poverty level"	m.c.-middle- & upper-m.c. l.c.-welfare or low income	m.c.-middle-class l.c.-working class	m.c.-middle-class l.c.-working class	m.c.-high-"sociocultural" l.c.-low "sociocultural"	m.c.-middle-class l.c.-welfare or unskilled labor	m.c.-"culturally advantaged" l.c.-"culturally disadvantaged	m.c.-upper-m.c l.c.-welfare
Ethnic and/or Racial Background of Sample	m.c.- white l.c.- 80% black, 20% white	m.c.-white l.c.-mostly white, some Puerto Rican	m.c. & l.c. white	Not reported	m.c.-European extraction l.c.-Middle Eastern & North African extraction	m.c. & l.c. black	m.c. - white l.c. - black	m.c. & l.c.-white
Type of Educational Institution	m.c.-Independent Schools l.c.-Head Start and Day Care	Nursery School Day care center Kindergarten classes	Traditional nursery schools Trad. Nursery schools with language emphasis Day Care	m.c.-2 state nursery schools l.c.-1 state nursery school 1 state day nursery	Nursery and kindergarten classes	Public School (P.S.) kindergartens	m.c.-P.S. kindergartens l.c.-P.S. kindergartens Day care centers	m.c. & l.c.-University Early Childhood Center
Number of Schools/ Centers Classes	m.c.-4 independent schools l.c.-5 Head Start centers, 1 day care center	m.c.-1 nursery school l.c.-1 day care center 2-kindergarten classes	m.c.-2 of each type l.c.-2 of each type	m.c. - 2 l.c.-2	m.c.-18 classes l.c.-18 classes	m.c.-6 "suburban" P.S.s l.c.-3 "inner-city" P.S.s	m.c.-1 kindergarten l.c.-2 P.S. kindergarten classes, 2 day care centers	m.c. & l.c. 1 University Center

[1] For all studies, m.c. = middle class group; l.c. = lower-class group.

Table 2 (cont.)

Categories	Stern, Bragdon & Gordon (1976)	Golomb (1975)	Tizard, Philps & Plewis (1976)	Smith & Dodsworth (1978)	Smilansky (1968)	Griffing (1980)	Rosen (1974)	Rubin, Maioni & Hornung (1976)
Site of Observations	Classroom	Classroom	Classroom & Outdoors	Classroom	Classroom & Outdoors	A special Playroom	Classroom	Classroom
Type of Data	Pencil & Paper Narrative records	Narrative records	Pencil & paper Narrative records	Selected details dictated into into tape recorder	Pencil & paper Detailed records	Pencil & paper Narrative records	Ratings on "standardized observational schedule"	Play behavior checklist
Focus of observation	Individual Child & interaction with others	Individual child & interaction with others	Individual child & interaction with others	Individual child & interaction with others	Play	Individual child & interaction with others	Individual Child	Individual child
Analytic Measures	1) Presence/ absence during play unit 2) Frequency of occurrence 3) Ratings	1) Content analysis 2) Score on symbolic play scale	1) Frequency	1) Presence during 5' time period 2) Freqency of occurrence	1) Content analysis 2) Presence/ absence of play elements 3) Verbal description 4) Average number of words per child	1) Ratings on 4-point scale	1) Frequency	1) Type & duration of social & cognitive play categorie

There are many possibilities which should not be ignored even though the data from the studies have not provided any clear indicators. It must be emphasized that many categories of information are not reported in all studies and that the information given frequently lacks the kind of detail that might differentiate between studies. Thus, to infer from such gross data that differences in home or school environments are not responsible in any way for the differences in children's play would be naive, as would be the assumption that any single factor is responsible.

The quality of the school environments, for example, cannot be discounted as a contributing source of differences in lower-class and middle-class children's symbolic play, and possibly as a source of difference in results. The comparability of the lower-class and middle-class classrooms/schools was not reported by Smilansky, Rosen, and Rubin et al. The situations reported on by the other five investigations differed from each other. Griffing reports that all schools serving middle-class children, except for a Montessori kindergarten, had space and equipment for symbolic play and that schools for low-SES children were at least as well-equipped with play materials as were the schools for high-SES children. Golomb reports that there were noticeable differences between the lower- and middle-class classrooms in supplies, open spaces, provisions for house play, as well as in teacher personality and educational philosophy. She does not, however, specify how they differed. Tizard et al. report that for each of the three types of schools the teacher role was similar for lower-class and middle-class children--there was little stimulation of or participation in the children's symbolic play by the teachers.

Stern et al. tried to control for teacher's attitudes and practices in relation to symbolic play. Because of the large number of sample selection

criteria, this was not entirely successful. The teachers of two of the six classes of lower-class children (constituting 50 percent of the lower-class, 4-year-old sample) displayed little interest in the children's symbolic play but scheduled a regular free play period during which many of the children engaged in symbolic play. The other teachers of both lower-class and middle-class children tried to encourage and stimulate play, although not equally or in the same ways. The Head Start and day care classes tended to have more, newer equipment and materials than the independent schools, while the latter tended to have better-trained teachers, who were more sophisticated about symbolic play and child development. That there was symbolic play occurring in all the classes selected suggests that these teachers may have resembled each other in ways that Stern et al. did not take into account, and which are not seen as crucial by investigators in general.

Smith and Dodsworth report that all four nursery schools were similar in design, equipment and daily routine, but one lower-class school differed from the others in that it was staffed by nursery nurses, while the other three had trained teachers. Except for the amount of teacher-child interaction, which varied from school to school, no further description was given of the nature or quality of the teaching. They found, however, that there was no significant relationship between teacher-child interaction and their findings.

Educators and researchers have suggested that the standard equipment and/or arrangement of symbolic play areas in preschools are unfamiliar to children who do not come from middle-class homes and/or who are not members of the dominant ethnic group and these areas, therefore, may not be conducive to symbolic play (see Curry, 1971).

There are other factors which may have affected the study results, not the play itself. One is the underlying approach of the investigator to children's symbolic play. Smilansky and Stern et al. in reporting their studies have articulated their approaches in some detail. One aspect is the value the investigator places on verbalization--the value of verbalization as an indicator of cognitive level as well as the weight given to it in the category system and in coding procedures. Smilansky places very high value on verbalization, seeing it as essential to the development and elaboration of the child's play and also as providing additional sources of satisfaction which are not available to children who engage only in action-oriented play. In comparing the two groups, she points out that for the middle-class children it is sufficient "to record the verbalization during play in order to understand fully the unfolding of the theme," while "only a detailed record of the actions of the lower-class children will reveal the roles and themes of the play" (1968, p. 39). The implication is, therefore, that middle-class children's play is more advanced. Of her six basic components, only two do not involve verbalization.

Stern et al. on the other hand, view non-verbal behavior as an important component of young children's play. Excluding the categories which are specifically focused on language, there are many which require the recording and coding of symbolic actions and other non-verbal behavior. Detailed directions were given to the observers for recording non-verbal behavior, since this is more difficult to record than verbalization, and the coding of non-verbal behavior is essential. In my view, to equate young children's verbalization during symbolic play with the total meaning of their play is to look at children's play with adult eyes alone. Only if non-verbal and verbal behavior are given equal consideration is it

possible to perceive the richness of children's symbolic play as well as the ambiguities.[17] Since, for children, both verbal and non-verbal behavior are essential for expressing their meaning, recognizing both allows the researcher to see play from the child's point of view. This difference in coding method might contribute to differences in results in some categories, such as emotional stance, persig differentiation, or type of signifier.

Another factor is suggested by Schwartzman (1978) in her wide-ranging cross-cultural analysis of children's play. She points out some of the problems in research studies that propose that lower-class children are "imaginatively disadvantaged." She states that "these children are found to be deficient in the style of play associated with middle- and upper-middle-class children, which is then taken to indicate (or at least suggest) deficiency in the cognitive, verbal, and social skills said to be associated with this form of play and these children" (p. 120). She adds, "in order to correct this deficit...researchers then proceed to train children to play in a 'middle-class' manner, which is then said to produce improved scores in the display of cognitive, verbal and social skills" (pp. 120-121).

What, then, have we learned, and what can we learn from reviewing these findings? For teachers of children, or future teachers of children, it should be a reminder that there are lower-class children whose symbolic play is similar to that of middle-class children,[18] and that objective observations of the children's behavior should indicate which children, middle- or lower-class, have the capacity to play, as well as those who need special help. It is unfortunate that there has been a tendency to assume that lower-class, minority-group children in the United States are comparable (in their economic and cultural backgrounds) to Smilansky's "culturally disadvantaged" and, therefore, that they too are not capable of

playing symbolically except on the very lowest level. Since teachers' expectations are likely to influence their behavior in relation to children, and, therefore, the children's behavior, these erroeous assumptions may even have affected study results.

We now know that research in this area has been unproductive in that it has not answered most of the questions; it has not clarified hypotheses about the ways in which the symbolic play of lower-class and middle-class children are the same or different, nor has it provided any clear evidence of the sources of conflicting findings. It has been productive, however, in that we now know that we do not know the answers, and that we must find a way to get more valid results.

We also know that research in this area is in a very primitive state. The relatively small number of studies, as well as the number of categories investigated, is evidence of the impoverished nature of this research. For half the studies, the comparison of the symbolic play of middle-class and lower-class children was not the only, nor even the major, focus of investigation. A majority of the investigators focused on four categories--persig play, type of signifier, group play, and length of unit--only the first two of which are intrinsic to symbolic play. Only three studies included as many as eight or nine similar categories. When one thinks of symbolic play in all its fullness and complexity and the many aspects that could be studied--the content of symbolism, the use of the self versus use of objects as self-signifiers, the use of symbols to represent the child's conscious and unconscious needs and wishes, play as an expression of the child's perception of reality, formal aspects of the play, such as degree of complexity, coherence, organization--one realizes how little has been done. Only the content and some formal characteristics of the play, represented

by the categories I have been discussing, have been explored. Except for Golomb's rating scale, which covers a number of kinds of symbolic play behavior, the categories studied are simple, and the measures used, with the exception of Smilansky, are quantitative. At the same time, it is understandable that most researchers tend to choose the simplest and, therefore, the most easily quantifiable characteristics of play to investigate first.

But, considering the results of this approach, perhaps we should question its usefulness. Although the Stern et al. study included a much larger number of symbolic play behaviors than those with which we have been concerned here, each one was considered separately. Also, the study focused on the conscious, cognitive aspects of play. At its completion I felt that in using this atomistic, relatively simplistic approach, much of what was essential to symbolic play was being ignored and that, perhaps, a more holistic, qualitative approach might be more fruitful.

The need for a more integrated approach to factors influencing children's symbolic play behavior is also indicated. Classifying children grossly in terms of social class or ethnic background has provided little enlightenment. Sophisticated methods for checking relationships between combinations of home and school environmental factors and more complex symbolic play behaviors should be used.

The process of trying to understand exactly what was meant by the various terms used in these studies, and especially to determine the equivalence of different category names across a number of studies emphasizes the importance of clarification of meaning. Although standardization of symbolic play terms would be most useful, I suspect that people will not easily give up their terms. But, regardless of the words

used, they must be defined so that others can understand them, and good, unambiguous examples of each term or category are essential. This will not only improve communication, but also will help researchers clarify for themselves the meaning of the terms they use.

Although the data, data collection procedures, and methods of analysis were fairly well reported in these studies, they are not delineated sufficiently for the reader to understand how the results were obtained.[19] Because symbolic play is considered so important for young children's cognitive and affective development, progress in research on symbolic play is very desirable. It seems to me that one way of attaining this would be for researchers to describe the problems encountered in their research, the compromises made (often because of too little time and money), and what they would do differently if they were able to continue research in this field. Researchers need to learn from others' experiences and new understandings as well as from their own. Perhaps the suggestion made by Shulman and Tamir (1973), in relation to research on teaching in the natural sciences, is appropriate here. They emphasize the need "to develop centers of research in which groups of investigators coordinate their efforts in joint attacks on common problems" (p. 1139).

Footnotes

[1] This review does not cover studies of the effects of training.

[2] This was part of a large scale, systematic study, conducted in 14 schools, grades 1 through 8, aimed mainly at challenging Piaget's theory that all games with rules are competitive.

[3] Several of which she defined somewhat differently.

[4] Motor play, exploratory activity, arts and crafts, constructional games, etc.

[5] The difficulties experienced by Stern et al. (1976) in locating centers attended by lower-class children in which symbolic play could be observed was a clear indication that, whatever the reasons, there was more symbolic play in schools attended by middle-class children than in those attended by lower-class children.

[6] That is, the object is not just a signifier in persig play, it is the major signifier.

[7] However, in the Stern et al. (1976) study, more than four-fifths of the group symbolic play at ages 3 and 4 consisted of persig play.

[8] And was coded separately as well as being part of the symbolic play scale.

9 Often called role-differentation, and similar to what Piaget (1962) calls collective symbolism.

10 Stern et al. because their sample includes only children who engaged in symbolic play and Eifermann because her sample is not within the age range covered by the other studies.

11 Smilansky states that her conclusions about the influence of age were based on "general observations" (p. 40). To determine the effect of chronological age, she checked "the presence or absence of the major elements of sociodramatic play" (p. 39). She found that most of the middle-class children used all six basic components by age 3, whereas the lower-class child "lacks" most of them. No increase in the number of components was observed with the increase in age.

12 Smilansky states that her conclusions about the influence of "I.Q." were based on "general observation" (p. 40). She does not mention which test, if any, was used to measure intelligence.

13 Griffing, who used the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test as a measure of mental maturity, pointed out that "the imaginative and cognitive skills involved in socio-dramatic play may represent types of cognitive functioning different from those tested in traditional IQ tests" (1980, p. 27).

14 There is a considerable amount of support for this finding in other studies, e.g. Halfar (1970); Lunzer (1959); Markey (1935); and Piaget (1962).

15 Some of Griffing's "high-SES" group are described as "semiskilled" workers, while Smith and Dodsworth characterize their lower-class group as mainly working class and Tizard et al., characterize theirs as working class. Thus, some of Griffings "high-SES" group may be similar to some of Smith and Dodsworth's and Tizard's et al. lower-class group.

16 What is reported depends partly on the design of the study and partly on where the study is reported--in a book or unpublished report or in a journal where the constraints due to lack of space are considerably greater. (And it is not always possible to distinguish which is the primary reason). Eifermann is not included because her study belongs in neither group.

17 The ambiguities evident when nonverbal behavior is recorded also makes coding much more difficult than if coding is based on verbalization alone.

18 Griffing points out that "it would be a mistake to conclude that all high-SES children performed well and all low-SES children performed poorly. Highly imaginative play episodes were observed among lower-class children...a number of high-SES children received very low play scores" (1980, pp. 25-26).

19 Smilansky's study is an extreme example of this. Her observers recorded play episodes in different play areas, not the play of individual children. Since her report is almost entirely descriptive, one does not know whether she actually counted the number of children in each play episode who were engaged in persig play, or just counted the number of persig play episodes, or counted at all. We do not know if her description was based on her impressions from reading and records taken by her observers or from going into some classrooms herself. Nor do we know whether some children in a class participated in more than one of the recorded play episodes.

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